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Iraqi EFL learners' use of formulaic language in writing proficiency exams

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Abstract

The present study investigated the use of formulaic expressions by Iraqi EFL students in writing proficiency exams. It aimed to identify the differences between high and low proficient students in using formulaic language. Besides, it examined the association between the students' scores in a writing proficiency test and their use of formulaic expressions. It adopted the Hyland's (2005) model of meta-discourse markers in which the meta-discourse markers are divided into two types, namely, interactive and interactional. It also employed a mixed-method design in which both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used for collecting and analyzing the data of the study. The quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS whereas the qualitative data were analyzed qualitatively. The analysis of data revealed that some interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers are more frequent than others. It is also found that there are differences between high and low proficient students in using formulaic expressions in favor of high proficient students. More importantly, the findings revealed that the overall use of formulaic expressions is positively associated with the students' scores in a writing proficiency test. Based on the obtained findings, the study recommends that the interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers which are found to be salient among high proficient students should be taught by language teachers and also incorporated in the curricula of teaching English. The present study would contribute to better understanding of the relationship between writing proficiency and the use of formulaic language in writing. It provides useful information for EFL learners, teachers and curriculum designers as it shows the significance of using formulaic language in developing the students' writing ability.

Keywords: Formulaic language; writing; proficiency; writing exam; EFL learners'

1. Introduction

It has been argued that compared to the other language skills, writing is the most difficult as it shows how individuals utilize a language to argue opinions, express concepts, and synthesize veracious perspectives. Therefore, effective writing is viewed as one of the requirements for effective communication (Smith, 2013). For this reason, it is also regarded an important constituent of learning a second language. In this connection, the writing competence of learners and the challenges they face while exchanging written communication has usually been considered vitally significant. One of the several challenges facing the L2 learners is producing utterly coherent written texts (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Nevertheless, there exist some ways to establish coherence in written texts; one of these could be utilizing formulaic language.

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Formulaic language has been studied and defined differently by many researchers and linguists (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). For instance, it refers to multiword structures which carry certain meanings as an individual unit (Chen & Baker, 2010). Moreover, Wood (2002) viewed formulaic language as "multi-word or multi-word strings produced and recalled as a chunk, like a single lexical item, rather than being generated from individual items and rules" (p. 3). In addition, it is used to refer to the multi-word units of language which are recalled from long-term memory as single units (Myles, Hooper & Mitchell, 1998). According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), it is "a multi-word lexical phenomenon that exists somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than language that is put together each time" (p. 1). Though formulaic language has been named differently, such as lexical phrases, lexical bundles, clusters and formulaic sequences, the present study uses the term 'formulaic language' as indicated in the title of this study and also adopts the definition of formulaic language by Wray (2002) who viewed this term as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (p. 9).

One of several functions of such multiword units is that these structures simplify fluent linguistic communication and production (Ohlrogge, 2009) since they are useful for signaling the text structure, specifying the relations between them and organizing ideas (Li & Schmitt, 2009). Consequently, using formulaic language might assist language learners to produce coherent written discourses. Because using formulaic language has an important role in coherence and written communication, it can be said that such a kind of language, i.e. formulaic language, to offer benefits to second/foreign language learners while doing proficiency exams as believed in the literature (e.g. Ustunbas, 2014). Becuase using formulaic language is considered to be useful to establish coherence and enhance learners' proficiency, it could be assumed that learners should, therefore, be exposed to/ taught formulaic language. Yet, chances for exposure to formulaic language in a foreign/second language teaching context is very limited since language is not used in the daily life as their native language. Therefore, the main exposure sources to formulaic language can only be course books, classroom materials and teacher-talk (Meunier, 2012).

Based on what has been discussed above, formulaic language is considered as the center of interest among EFL/ESL researchers as it is regarded to have a great impact on learning a foreign/second language, production and communication (Weinert, 1995). In this respect, Jones and Haywood (2004) contended that learning formulaic language represents an important proportion of learning process of a second or foreign language. In terms of the communicative function, formulaic language could assist learners accomplish their interactional purposes and thus succeed in communication effectively though they do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge (Wei & Ying, 2011). Besides communication, Hyland (2008) stressed the importance of formulaic expressions in producing a language in that using such expressions assists them to convey the meanings of texts. Another impact of formulaic language on producing a language is that it improves the coherence in written communication through indicating the linking ideas and discourse structure (Li & Schmitt, 2009). Since coherence is related to formulaic language, this term should be discussed.

Bamberg (1983) views coherence as "the effective utilization of textual structures that help readers anticipate upcoming textual information, thereby enabling them to reduce and organize the text into an understandable and coherent whole" (p. 419). Lee (2002) has recently argued that coherence is concerned with the links among concepts in a text which assist readers produce meaning. Regarding the association between coherence and the use of formulaic language, Hyland (2008) applauded that the misuse or lack of formulaic language might show the absence of fluency in writing. Furthermore,

Li and Schmitt (2009) pointed out that failure to use such native-like expressions results in the failure to in writing like natives of a certain language. In terms to the coherence aspect in writing, Hyland (2012) maintained that using formulaic language establishes the coherence of a text, enhances the message interpretation in a given text and facilitates comprehension in certain contexts.

The use of formulaic language is considered as an indicator of the general proficiency in a certain language (Forsberg, 2010). Proficiency is described as a process in which language learners utilize various linguistic forms suitable for the situational and linguistic contexts (Ellis, 1994). Based on a formalist perspective, proficiency is viewed as "an ultimately unknowable abstraction that reflects the universal competence of native speakers" (Bialystok, 1998, p. 502). Similarly, Ustunbas (2014) claimed that there is a positive connection between the learners' overall proficiency and the use of formulaic language, proposing that much research should tackle the extent to which formulaic language are helpful means for proficiency in writing. Therefore, the present study could be considered as reply to this call and thus aims to study the extent to which Iraqi EFL university students use formulaic language in writing proficiency exams.

However, literature reveals that most EFL learners unfortunately do not utilize or even notice formulaic expressions, which certainly lead to disconnectedness and incoherence among the ideas in their written texts and thus hinder communication. Since using formulaic language affects positively writing with respect of coherence, it is vitally important to enhances the learners' awareness of formulaic expressions, so that they use them to enhance their proficiency in general and writing performance in particular.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study is intended to achieve the following objectives:

i. To identify the extent to which Iraqi EFL university students utilize formulaic language in a given writing proficiency exam.

ii. To examine the association between the use of formulaic expressions and the writing proficiency as revealed through Iraqi EFL university students' scores in a given writing proficiency exam.

iii. To find out the extent to which formulaic language is taught at the university level through teachers' input and curricula of English teaching.

3. Literature Review

This section presents a discussion of the relevant literature; it highlights the criteria used for identifying formulaic language, the significance of formulaic language in the learners' language development and the similar works.

3.1 Criteria for identifying formulaic language

Several criteria for identifying formulaic language have been proposed in the literature, the most recent of which are the ones suggested by Wray (2008: 119) which include the following:

1. There is something syntactically unusual about the word string;
2. Part or all the string do not have semantic transparency;
3. The string is related to a certain register or situation;
4. The string fulfills a function besides the meaning of its constituent words;
5. Such a formulation is typical of this speaker in transferring this concept;

6. This string of words has a related action, phonological pattern or orthographic phenomena, and/or the writer/speaker is repeating something just read/heard;

7. This word string has been marked grammatically or lexically to give it status as a unit;

8. It is probably that the writer/speaker has faced this accurate formulation in communication from other individuals;

9. While this string seems to be novel, it is obviously derived from something which is formulaic;

10. This string is formulaic but unintentionally used improperly

11. This string consists of linguistic material that is too complicated or not complicated enough to suit the overall competence of the speaker.

3.2 Formulaic Language and Language Development

Literature (e.g. Wei & Ying, 2011) stressed the importance of formulaic language in developing language. For instance, it is claimed that "formulaic language is basic to language development, learning, production and processing" (Wood, 2002, p. 2). Thus, it is perhaps crucial to shed some light on the importance of formulaic language in developing language. In this respect, Wood (2002) argued that formulaic language saves the effort of language processing as it is stored and extracted from long-term memory. Moreover, it is asserted that "formulaic sequences are proved to be stored and retrieved by speakers as unanalyzed wholes and therefore relieve the cognitive load in language processing" (Wei & Ying, 2011, p. 708).

Similarly, much research emphasized that formulaic language has a processing benefit. For instance, Conklin and Schmitt (2008) studied the extent to which formulaic expressions provide the users of a language benefits in respect of processing by making a comparison between the time non-native as well as native speakers take to read formulaic sequences with their non-formulaic expressions. The results showed that in terms of language processing, formulaic expressions are more useful than non-formulaic ones in that formulaic language is processed in a limited time than non-formulaic expressions by both samples.

Besides, formulaic language has a facilitative role in the production of fluent language (Wei & Ying, 2011). In order to show the impact of formulaic language on the production of language, much research has been carried out. For example, Wood (2006) scrutinized the extent to which the use of formulaic expressions influences the development of production of fluent language or not. The results revealed that language learners utilize a big number of formulaic expressions with various functions and the employment of such expressions improves their fluency in the production of the language. Besides, Pawley and Syder (1983) stressed the importance of formulaic language, particularly the use of discourse markers as they save planning time for the users of a language, consequently emphasizing the argument that formulaic language plays a role in the production fluency. More importantly, using formulaic language assist language learners to be native-like and fluent users of a language (Wei & Ying, 2011).

3.3 Coherence

Coherence is defined as "the relationships that link the ideas in a text to create meaning for the readers" (Lee, 2002, p. 135). Nevertheless, there is disagreement on providing a general definition of coherence in that it is "a complex concept, involving a multitude of reader- and text-based features" (Johns, 1986, p. 247). Such an absence of agreement over the sense of coherence led to many definitions in the literature. It is regarded to derive its sense from both reader-based and text-based

features; thus, it could be seen from two several perspectives; as internal to the reader and as internal to the text (Lee, 2002). In terms of text-based features, Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposed that linguistic signals in the coherence of text construct by assisting writers to link ideas and guiding readers to obtain the meaning intended by the writer.

3.4 Formulaic Language and Coherence

As one of requirements of written discourse, coherence is regarded to be facilitated and constructed by utilizing certain formulaic expressions such as meta-discourse markers (Hyland, 2012). Thus, the utilization of formulaic expressions is regarded to assist learners produce more coherent texts and communicate their messages more successfully. Research that investigated the impact of formulaic expressions on coherence shows that using formulaic expressions contributes to making a text more coherent (Hyland, 2012). Finally, Yang and Sun (2012) examined the argumentative essays written by of under-graduate students in China in order to identify the similarities and differences in the employment of cohesive devices. The findings showed a positive association between the students' writing quality and (correct) utilization of cohesive devices, irrespective of their proficiency in English as a foreign language. Nevertheless, Yang and Sun (2012) contended that the results in the literature regarding cohesive devices to the writing scores of learners are hardly conclusive because of their methodology. Besides, they pointed out that a big number of EFL students cannot use coherence facilitating markers in their writing correctly. Thus, they proposed that researchers are advised to carry out further studies with different methods so as to enhance the teaching of these markers and assist learners overcome the challenges of producing a coherent text.

3.5 Meta-discourse

Within the scope of formulaic language, meta-discourse has drawn the researchers' attention particularly with regard to its role in writing. It is common knowledge that meta-discourse assists in connecting sentences, ideas, readers and writer with the help of its certain markers. Meta-discourse has been viewed differently by many researchers and linguists (Tan & Eng, 2014). For instance, it is defined as "Linguistic material in texts, written or spoken, which does not add anything to the propositional content but that is intended to help the listener or reader organize, interpret and evaluate the information given" (Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993). It is also viewed as linguistic devices in writing that are employed to organize discourse and reveal the stance of a writer towards the reader or the text (Hyland & Tse, 2004). In fact, there have been various typologies of meta-discourse in the literature; however, the typology adopted in the present study is that of Hyland (2005) which will be explained in the next section.

4. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts the typology of meta-discourse by Hyland (2005). In this Model, Hyland (2005) classified meta-discourse into two essential types, namely, interactive and interactional. According to him, "interactional meta-discourse assists in the conveyance of the reactions and emotions of the writer to the readers whereas interactive meta-discourse is employed to organize the written discourse to lead the reader through the text" (p. 2). These two types are further divided into several sub-categories (Hyland, 2005, p. 49) as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Categories of meta-discourse markers

Category	**Function**	**Examples**
Interactive	**"Help to guide the reader through the text".**	
1- Transitions	"express relations between main clauses"	And; thus; but; in addition
2- Frame markers	"refer to discourse acts, stages or sequences"	my purpose is; to conclude; finally
3- Endophoric markers	"refer to information in other parts of the text"	in section 2; see Figure; noted above
4- Evidentials	"refer to information from other text	Z states; according to X
5- Code glosses	"elaborate propositional meanings"	in other words; such as; e.g.; namely
Interactional	"**Involve the reader in the text**"	
1- Hedges	"Withhold commitment and open dialogue"	About; possible; perhaps; might
2- Boosters	"Emphasize certainty or close dialogue"	it is clear that; definitely; in fact;
3- Attitude markers	"Express writer's attitude to proposition"	I agree; unfortunately;
4- Self-mentions	"Explicit reference to author"	Our; my; me; I;
5- Engagement markers	"Explicitly build relationship with reader"	you can see that; note; consider

This typology will be used in the present study because it is useful for the data analysis of the study; it is also more recent and comprehensive than other typologies in the literature. Moreover, it is common in the literature, for example, it was adopted as one of the models used for the data analysis in Kiliç (2015).

5. Methodology

This section presents the methodology followed in this study; it discusses the study design, the population and sampling, the data collection instruments and data analysis.

5.1 Study design

This study employs a mixed-method design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the participants. This approach is useful because it assists in understanding the extent of using formulaic languages by Iraqi EFL learners and the association between the use of formulaic language and writing proficiency as revealed through the scores of the learners. Therefore, the present study could be considered an exploratory correlational study.

5.2 Population and sampling

The population of the present study consisted of 100 fourth level students who enrolled in the English Department at the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at Babylon University. The participants age ranged between 19 and 25 and the mean age was 22. The sampling techniques used for data collection is simple random. All students are native speakers of Arabic and English for them is considered to be a foreign language. However, the sample of the study consisted of (30%) of the whole

population. Those learners were divided into two types, namely, high and low proficient students in writing based on the scores they got in the writing proficiency test, 15 students each as follows:

Table 2. Categories of students' proficiency

Categories of Students' Proficiency	N	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. Deviation
High proficient students	15	78	90	83.67	3.56
Low proficient students	15	50	77	65.47	8.07

5.3 Data collection instruments

Two data collection instruments were used in this study, namely, a writing proficiency test as well as an interview. The writing test was developed from different questions used in several TOEFL tests and then was validated by experts with PhD. In others words, some questions of many TOEFL tests were checked by the researcher and some them were selected as a writing proficiency test. Then, the test was distributed among the sample of the study i.e. 30 selected students. Then, such tests were marked by the researcher. Finally, a total of 5 students were interviewed so as to provide more elaborations on their use of formulaic language and its role in their language development.

5.4 Methods of analysis

The collected papers of the writing proficiency test were marked and then the students' overall scores are identified. After that, the number of formulaic expressions were identified from the test papers and counted and categorized based on their types i.e. whether they are interactive or interactional. Using SPSS software, the means and standard deviations of the use of the formulaic expressions were calculated. The differences between high and low proficient students in using the formulaic expressions were also examined using Independent T-test. Finally, the association between the use of formulaic expressions and the overall scores in the writing test proficiency was scrutinized using Pearson correlation coefficient. However, the students' interviews were qualitatively analyzed and interpreted. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis of both types of data and recommendations were proposed. The next section presents the data analysis of the present study.

5.5 Data analysis

This section presents the findings of the current study; it shows the findings related to the use interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers as revealed through the test as well as the association between the use of meta-discourse markers and their writing proficiency level.

5.6 Use of meta-discourse markers by high and low proficient students

Table (3) shows the findings related to the use of interactive meta-discourse markers by high proficient students.

Table 3. Use of interactive meta-discourse markers by high proficient students

Interactive meta-discourse markers	Minimum frequency	Maximum frequency	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Transitions	5	8	6.27	1.033	1

Frame markers	2	5	3.33	.976	2
Endophoric markers	1	3	2.20	.676	3
Evidentials	0	3	1.53	.915	5
Code glosses	0	3	1.60	.986	4
Total of interactive meta-discourse markers	**11**	**19**	**14.93**	**2.685**	**-**

As revealed in Table (3) above, the means of the frequencies of transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses are 6.27, 3.33, 2.20, 1.53 and 1.60 respectively. Besides, the mean of the overall frequency of these interactive meta-discourse markers among the high proficient students is 14.93. It is noticed that the most two frequent interactive meta-discourse markers among high proficient students are transitions and frame markers as revealed in the Table above. However, the least frequent interactive meta-discourse markers include code glasses and evidentials, respectively. Table (4) below shows the findings related to the use of interactional meta-discourse markers by high proficient students.

Table 4. Use of interactional meta-discourse markers by high proficient students

Interactional meta-discourse types	**Minimum frequency**	**Maximum frequency**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Rank**
Hedges	3	6	4.60	.986	1
Boosters	2	4	2.87	.640	2
Attitude markers	2	3	2.13	.352	3
Self-mentions	0	3	1.60	.737	4
Engagement markers	0	2	1.00	.756	5
Total of Interactional meta-discourse markers	**9**	**15**	**12.20**	**1.740**	**-**

As revealed in Table (4) above, the means of the frequencies of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers are 4.60, 2.87, 2.13, 1.60 and 1.00 respectively. Moreover, the overall frequency of these interactional meta-discourse markers among the high proficient students is 12.20. It is revealed that the most two frequent interactional meta-discourse markers among high proficient students are hedges and boosters as shown in Table (4) above. Nevertheless, the least frequent interactional meta-discourse markers among the high proficient students include self-mentions and engagement markers, respectively. Table (5) below reveals the findings related to the use of interactive meta-discourse markers by low proficient students.

Table 5. Use of interactive meta-discourse markers by low proficient students

Interactive meta-discourse markers	**Minimum frequency**	**Maximum frequency**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Rank**
Transitions	4	7	5.33	.976	1
Frame markers	1	3	2.20	.561	2
Endophoric markers	0	3	1.87	.834	4

Evidentials	0	3	1.27	.884	3
Code glosses	0	3	.87	.990	5
Total of interactive meta-discourse markers	**7**	**14**	**11.53**	**1.885**	-

As revealed in Table (5) above, the means of the frequencies of transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses are 5.33, 2.20, 1.87, 1.27 and 0.87 respectively. Furthermore, the mean of the overall frequencies of these interactive meta-discourse markers among the low proficient students is 11.53. It is noticed that the most two frequent interactive meta-discourse markers among the low proficient students are transitions and frame markers as shown in the Table above. However, the least frequent interactive meta-discourse markers include endophoric markers and evidentials, respectively. Table (6) below shows the results related to the use of interactional meta-discourse markers by low proficient students.

Table 6. Use of interactional meta-discourse markers by low proficient students

Interactional meta-discourse markers	Minimum frequency	Maximum frequency	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Hedges	3	5	3.93	.799	1
Boosters	1	3	2.13	.640	2
Attitude markers	0	3	1.53	.834	4
Self-mentions	0	2	1.20	.775	3
Engagement markers	0	3	.87	.990	5
Total of Interactional MD	6	12	9.67	1.799	**Rank**

As noticed in Table (6) above, the means of the frequencies of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers are 3.93, 2.13, 1.53, 1.20 and 0.87 respectively. Moreover, the overall frequency of these interactional meta-discourse markers among the low proficient students is 9.67. It is shown that the most two frequent interactional meta-discourse markers among the low proficient students are hedges and boosters as seen in Table (6) above. However, the least frequent interactional meta-discourse markers among low proficient students are attitude markers and engagement markers. Table (7) below presents the findings related to the overall use of interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers by high and low proficient students.

Table 7. Use of interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers by low and high proficient students

Type of meta-discourse markers	High and low proficient students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interactive	High proficient students	14.93	2.685
	Low proficient students	11.53	1.885
Interactional	High proficient students	12.20	1.740
	Low proficient students	9.67	1.799

Table (7) shows the means of the frequencies of both interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers. Based on these frequencies, it can be concluded that the high proficient students used more meta-discourse markers than low proficient students in the proficiency writing test.

5.7 Differences between high and proficient students in using meta-discourse markers

This sub-section presents the findings related to the differences between high and low proficient students in using both types of meta-discourse markers. Table (8) shows the results of T-test which was used to identify whether there are differences in using the meta-discourse markers between the two groups of participants and the extent to which such differences are significant. Such differences will be presented in Table (8) for the individual interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers as well as the overall interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers. Based on the T-test, if the null hypothesis which indicates that there is no difference between the two groups is rejected, it means that there are differences between the two groups in using meta-discourse markers. However, if the null hypothesis is accepted, it means that there is no difference between the two groups in using the meta-discourse markers.

Table 8. Differences between high and low proficient students in using meta-discourse markers

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of Transitions is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.029[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Frame markers is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.002[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Endophoric markers is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.325[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of Evidentials is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.461[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
5	The distribution of Codeglosses is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.061[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
6	The distribution of Total of interactive MD is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.001[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.
7	The distribution of Hedges is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.081[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
8	The distribution of Boosters is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.011[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.
9	The distribution of Attitude markers is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.029[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

[1] Exact significance is displayed for this test.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
10	The distribution of Selfmentions is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.217[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
11	The distribution of Engagement markers is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.567[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.
12	The distribution of Total of Interactional MD is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.001[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.
13	The distribution of Grand total is the same across categories of proficiency.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.000[1]	Reject the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

[1] Exact significance is displayed for this test.

Table (8) above reveals that there are significant differences between high and low proficient students in the use of two types of interactive meta-discourse markers, namely, transition and framework in favor of high proficient students in that the null hypotheses are rejected in these two types. In terms of the interactional meta-discourse markers, it is revealed that there are significant differences between high and low proficient students in using two types, namely, boosters and frame markers. More importantly, there are also significant differences between high and low proficient students in the overall use of interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers in favor of high proficient students.

5.8 Association between the test scores and the use of meta-discourse markers

This section shows the extent of association between the scores of the writing proficiency test as well as the use of meta-discourse markers and the direction of this relationship. Table (9) reveals the results of Pearson correlation coefficient regarding the association between the test scores and the use of interactive meta-discourse markers.

Table 9. Association between test scores and use of interactive meta-discourse markers

Interactive meta-discourse markers		**Transitions**	**Frame markers**	**Endophoric markers**	**Evidentials**	**Code glosses**	**Total of interactive meta-discourse markers**
Scores	Pearson Correlation	.486**	.515**	.440*	.171	.272	.631**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.004	.015	.367	.146	.000
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

Table (9) above shows that there is a positive association between the scores of writing proficiency test and the use of transition and frame markers as well as the overall use of interactive meta-discourse markers at the level 0.01. Moreover, there is a positive association between the scores of writing proficiency test and the use of endophoric markers at the level of 0.05. However, there is not

association between the test scores and the use of evidentials and code glosses. The following table reveals the extent of association between the scores of writing proficiency test and the use of interactional meta-discourse markers.

Table 10. Association between test scores and use of interactional meta-discourse markers

Interactional meta-discourse markers		Hedges	Boosters	Attitude markers	Self-mentions	Engagement markers	Total of Interactional meta-discourse markers
Scores	Pearson Correlation	.528**	.512**	.635**	.432*	.011	.767**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.004	.000	.017	.953	.000
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

Table (10) above shows that there is a positive association between the scores of writing proficiency test and the use of hedge, boosters and attitude markers as well as the overall use of interactional meta-discourse markers at the level 0.01. Besides, there is a positive association between the scores of writing proficiency test and the use of self-mention markers at the level of 0.05. Nevertheless, there is no association between the test scores and the use of engagement markers. It is also shown that there is no association between the test scores and the use of engagement markers.

5.9 Analysis of Interviews

The interview was conducted with five interviewees after the analysis of the quantitative data to explicate and elaborate on the quantitative analysis. When asked about the extent to which formulaic expressions are formally instructed by teachers and are incorporated in the curricula of English, the interviewees explained that a few formulaic expressions are taught in formal classes in grammar and writing courses. However, they proposed that such expressions should be all taught to the EFL students and there should be much practice related to using such formulaic expressions. Moreover, they hoped that teachers should consider such language expressions in their teaching plans as well. Some of the interviewees acknowledged that they are not aware of the importance of formulaic language especially in writing. A total of three interviewees argued that they cannot use some formulaic expressions appropriately and thus avoid using them in their writing, especially when such expressions are inappropriately used would affect their scores. Among the reasons they stated concerning the difficulty of using formulaic expressions in writing are the insufficient knowledge of their use in English, the cultural differences between their first language, Arabic and English, the less attention given to these expressions during language instruction, the lack of awareness of the importance of these formulaic expressions in writing and so forth. At the end of the interview, the participants requested these language expressions should be taught in separate units in writing courses and stressed the importance of doing much practice while learning these significant language expressions.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study investigated the extent to which Iraqi EFL students use formulaic expressions in writing proficiency exams. It also examined how high and low proficient students in writing use these language expressions and how the use of the formulaic language is associated to their scores in writing proficiency exams. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed that the high proficient students used two types of interactive meta-discourse markers more frequently, namely, transitions and frame markers. Although these meta-discourse markers are more preferred by low proficient students, the quantitative analysis revealed that there are significant differences in using these formulaic expressions between high and low proficient students in favor of high proficient students. In addition, it is found that the most frequent interactional meta-discourse markers among high and low proficient students are hedges and boosters. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in their use in favor of high proficient students.

Moreover, it is shown that some interactive formulaic expressions are less preferred by the high proficient students, namely, evidentials and code glosses while endophoric and code glosses are less preferred by low proficient students. In terms of interactional formulaic expressions, self-mentions and engagement markers are less preferred by high proficient students while attitude markers and engagement markers are less preferred by low proficient students. The findings of the study revealed that there is a positive association between the writing proficiency test scores and some of the interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers as revealed in Tables (9 & 10). More importantly, there is a positive association between the overall use of formulaic expressions and writing proficiency test scores. The findings of the study regarding the association between the writing proficiency and the use of formulaic expressions are congruent with the findings of some studies, for example, Wood (2006), Wei and Ying (2011) and Yang and Sun (2012).

Based on the obtained results, the present study recommends that formulaic expressions, especially the ones which are salient among high proficient students, should be taught and included in the teachers' plans. They should be also incorporated in the curricula of teaching English. Teachers should pay much attention to the practice of these language expressions by students so as to ensure that students use formulaic language appropriately. Teachers should raise the students' awareness of the importance of using these formulaic expressions in their writing so as to be native-like and fluent users of English.

Since this study is limited to a small sample of EFL fourth level students at Babylon University, future researchers should investigate the use of the formulaic expressions by students at different levels of study, different faculties and universities to enlarge the sample of their studies. Moreover, a study should be conducted to investigate the association between the use of formulaic expressions and the other productive skills such as speaking. More significantly, the present study highly recommends that an experimental study should be conducted to investigate the effect of teaching formulaic expressions as treatment and a comparison should be, then, made between the experimental and controlling groups in terms of language proficiency. To conclude, it can be said this small-scaled research which investigated the use of formulaic language in Iraq; much research should be conducted to investigate formulaic expressions and their relationship to language development in EFL teaching and learning contexts, especially in the Arab world.

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